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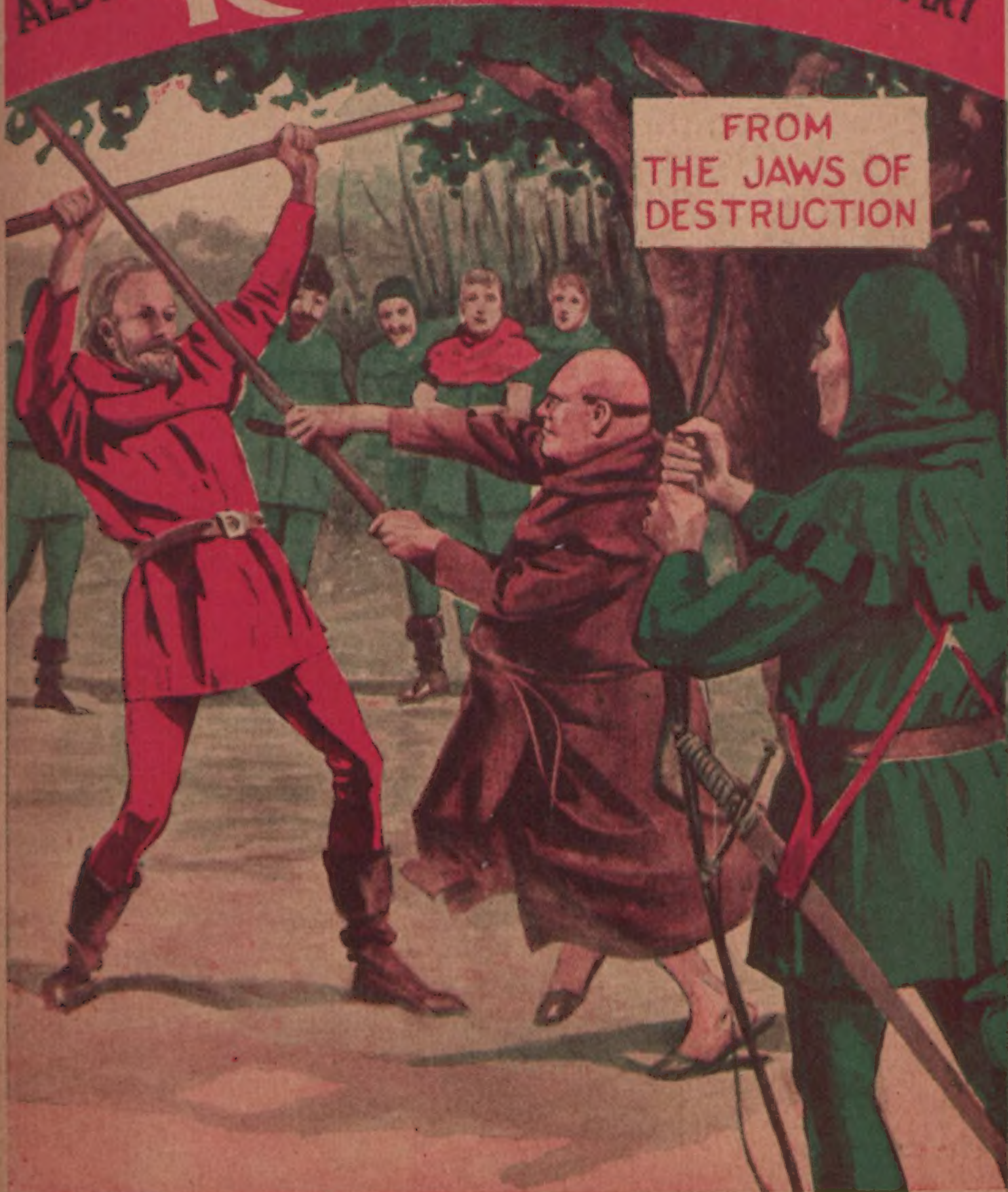
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From the Jaws of Destruction



Robin Hood and Little John Undaunted in the Face of Doom

CHAPTER 1.

The Red Tower of Derby Castle.

"HAIL to Osbert de Grayle, Lord of Derby!"

This greeting, shouted by the Normans, was mingled with hoots, hisses, and muttered threats.

"Back to your dens, you Saxon hogs!" exclaimed a mail-clad soldier, striking a man across the face with the flat of his sword.

"Hog in your teeth, Norman scum!" retorted the Saxon, a stalwart, poorly-clad man.

The edge of the sword turned, it flashed in the air, and the Saxon fell with a dreadful wound in his neck.

A savage yell went up, and there was a rush towards the brutal soldier; but Osbert de Grayle's pikemen drove the crowd back.

"Heaven deliver us from such tyrants, or we perish!" a woman shrieked, wringing her hands. "Ye men of Saxon birth, will ye thus stand by and see murder done?"

The woman was tall and gaunt. Her face was drawn with sorrow and pinched with starvation, and the light of madness shone in her eyes. Her white hair fell in unkempt masses over her neck and shoulders, and, standing with her bare arms uplifted, she posed like a weird prophetess.

"Listen, all!" she continued, her shrill voice ringing above the din.

"The Normans stole my children. My boys they slew. My daughters they turned into slaves. Oh, Heaven, save us from these monsters!"

"Who is that woman?" demanded Osbert de Grayle, bringing his horse to a standstill.

"Margaret Woolrych, my lord," replied a man. "She is a well-known witch, a maker of charms that blight, and potions that kill slowly. Her victims are numbered by the hundred."

"Pitiful liar!" Margaret Woolrych exclaimed. "I am no witch, as all can tell. Have you forgotten how my husband was slain on the threshold of his own house? Have you forgotten how that house was burnt over my head, and I fled to the forest? Vengeance! I cry to Heaven for vengeance!"

"Let her be added to the rest and taken to the Red Tower," said Osbert de Grayle. "Ho, there! sword and pikemen, drive this noisy rabble back to their filthy hovels!"

The Lord of Derby was returning from a grand foraging expedition. In other words, he had been making a grand "drive" among the Saxons living near the town and on the outskirts of the great forest.

For some time there had been a semblance of peace in and about Derby, but the apparent calm was that which heralds the bursting of a storm.

In the dead of night Osbert De Grayle, with a hundred men-at-arms and

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page 32.*

as many crossbow-men, swooped down upon the hapless people, and now he was returning to his grim stronghold with many trophies of his avarice and villainy.

Hundreds of oxen and horses, and thousands of sheep, were being driven into the Lord of Derby's strongly-fenced pastures. Peaceful homes had been ransacked and left to burn. The work of years lay wrecked, and the wagons bringing up the rear of the foraging band were filled with spoils.

But far better than all, to Osbert de Grayle's mind, were the prisoners. With despairing looks, heads bowed, and hands cruelly tied behind their backs, they came, blood-stained, bruised, and dragging their feet wearily over the ground.

The Norman tyrant, gigantic, fierce, and remorseless as a shark, felt his black heart bound with joy.

Where was Robin Hood, the avenger of wrongs? Where was the great outlaw who bore a charmed life? Where were his redoubtable archers? Why had he not come to the rescue?

Alas! Robin Hood had been called away to right a wrong in a distant part of the country, and the news having been brought to Osbert de Grayle, he had carried out his raid with the assurance that he would meet with little opposition from the peasantry.

But let him look to it, for Margaret Woolrych had not uttered her frenzied prayers for vengeance in vain.

"I fear not the Red Tower nor the axe of Hugo the executioner," she said as they hurled her into the midst of the other prisoners. "Do with me as you will, torture me, strike off my head; but for every pang I suffer, for every drop of blood I shed, retribution shall fall on you, cruel Lord of Derby!"

"Silence her," said the Norman brute. "Thrust a gag into the hag's mouth! By the powers of darkness, she shall have but short shrift! Hugo! Where is Hugo?"

"My lord's slave is here."

A great, squat, hunchbacked, red-haired man stepped forward. He was clad in a tight-fitting costume of coarse red material, with a short black cape

flung loosely over his shoulders. On his left arm was embroidered an axe, the dreadful emblem of his calling.

"Remind me that you attend to the beldam first," the nobleman said. "It were well that she was out of the way. Hark to the yelping of my bloodhounds! Well they know what is in store for them."

"And your lordship's leopards," grinned Hugo.

"Ay, I forgot them," said Osbert de Grayle. "I gave orders that they were to be kept without food until I returned. Shade of Robert the Devil! how hungry they must be!"

This was said in the hearing of the prisoners, who set up a cry of dismay; but not one pleaded for mercy.

The order was given to advance. The drawbridge swung into its place, the portcullis, like a devouring monster, opened its jaws, and the procession passed through into the courtyard, upon which lay the shadow of the Red Tower, and beneath it the Hall of Death, with its hideous instruments of torture.

At the far end of the courtyard were two huge cages. One contained six bloodhounds that flew yelping at the bars as the prisoners were brought in, and the other was occupied by three fierce leopards.

The prisoners were ranged against the wall, and Osbert de Grayle, accompanied by Hugo the executioner, with a great shining axe over his shoulder, passed down the line.

Those who were doomed to die before sunset were marked with a red cross on the forehead by Hugo; those whose fates hung in the balance—and they were principally women and children—were left untouched.

The last of all was a maiden of some seventeen summers. In spite of her tearful eyes, Osbert de Grayle saw that she was lovely.

"Your name, wench," he said, putting his mailed hand under her chin. "Hold up your head. I trow that there should be roses blooming on your face. Take courage, child; you shall not die unless it is for love of me."

The soldiers and henchmen laughed loudly at their lord's pleasantry.

"My name is Ruth Steyne," the girl said, shrinking back. "I pray you let me return to my home. What have I done that I should be brought here? I am the only child of a poor widower. Without me he can do nothing in our humble home."

"But you have a sweetheart?" said Osbert de Grayle.

"I have; and as true and honest a swain as ever broke bread."

"His name?"

"That I will never give," Ruth replied; and the colour flew into her cheeks.

"Ah, how lovely you look now, my pretty one!" said Osbert de Grayle. "I have often wondered where you Saxons get your beauty from. Snayle!"

An elderly man dressed in black came forward.

"See that this maiden is well bestowed. I have other business to attend to now, but I will speak with her anon," the noble man said. "She shall be given a chance to serve in my household."

"Child, follow me," Snayle said. "If you resist there are men here who will compel you to obey."

"Resist!" Ruth cried. "What chance have I, a bound and helpless girl, of resisting?"

Turning to Osbert de Grayle with a look of scorn, she raised her head and followed Snayle through a postern.

"And now for the Hall of Death," said the Norman. "Hugo, your axe is ready?"

"I cleaned and well oiled it only this morning," the executioner replied. "My lord, you bade me remind you——"

"True, that the witch dies first."

Margaret Woolrych burst into a peal of shrill laughter.

"Welcome, death!" she cried, clapping her hands—which, unlike those of the others, had not been bound. "My secret will die with me!"

"Secret!" exclaimed Osbert de Grayle.

"Ay, and such a secret as you would give your ears to know," the old woman said. "Gold, jewels, rare things from the Far East, all buried and out of sight of all eyes but mine. Ho, ho! Lead on, executioner; I will follow."

"Stay!" said the Norman, whose greed was instantly aroused. "This woman dies not now. Have her placed in a dungeon, and report to me its exact locality."

The executioner at once ordered a man-at-arms to take Margaret Woolrych to a certain cell.

In single file, amid the savage howlings of the bloodhounds and snarling of the leopards, the doomed ones were then driven along to the Hall of Death. This was a large apartment occupying the whole area of the Red Tower, the domain of Hugo the executioner. In the middle was a raised platform, with a block standing upon it—the block upon which so many innocent heads had been severed from their bodies.

Five victims on this occasion were marked for execution.

Hugo and his assistants placed them on a bench at the end of the platform, while Osbert de Grayle, always present on such occasions, sat lolling in a chair, with crossed legs, and watching with fiendish pleasure as each hapless prisoner took the last few steps between life and death.

We will not dwell upon the terrible scene. Suffice it to say that the vile work went on until but one was left on the bench. In obedience to the beckoning of Hugo's finger, he, a young man in the heyday of life, advanced.

"Fear not; I will submit quietly," he said. "I crave but one favour. Let me die unbound."

"The others did not ask so much," Hugo grumbled as he ran his thumb along the edge of his axe.

"Oh, let him have his own way," Osbert de Grayle said. "It is but a small boon to ask, and easily granted. Prisoner, how old are you?"

"Twenty-one," was the reply as the knotted cords fell with a clatter on the scaffold. "My name is Augustin Hartford. You have heard that name before, if I mistake not."

"I know you to be the son of a rebel," De Grayle replied, frowning. "Would that I had your father here to deal with as you will be dealt with. But his time is to come, although he

fancies himself secure in the ranks of that arch-traitor, Robin Hood."

"My father will surely live to avenge my murder," replied the young man. "Get on with your vile work. I am ready."

"One moment!" cried De Grayle, rising. "You know of the secret bowers and caves deep down in the forest?"

"Why need you ask? I do."

"If I grant you life and freedom, will you lead me to them?"

"Yes, that I would, but only to see you die like a dog, with a rope round your neck."

"Death seize me if he shall go out of the world with so little pain," the nobleman said, in a fury. "Hugo, put him aside and reserve him for torture."

"My lord," said Hugo, "the dungeons are already full almost to overflowing."

"Let him share the Red Tower with you and your men," De Grayle replied. "You have chains and irons enough to hold him, I trow."

"Ay, and a hundred like him," said the executioner. "Come, then," he added, handing the axe to an assistant, "the day's work is done."

De Grayle left the Hall of Death, and then Hugo, with his hideous face all puckered with malice and fiendish delight, turned to the prisoner.

"Augustin Hartford," he said, "you are a fool. You have given me work to my taste. If you had dreamed of what is in store for you, you would have held your tongue and hugged the block closely as the others did."

Hugo told his assistant to place the prisoner in a certain room; then, muttering and clenching his hands, he opened a door and made his way up a winding staircase.

There were thirty stairs in each flight, then a landing with a room on each side, with loopholes in the walls to admit light and air, but so narrow that a man could scarcely thrust his arm through.

The top room, however, was larger, and had larger windows. It was next to the leaded roof, and had various niches in which all sorts of things were stowed, especially a quantity of pitch

and tow, and flints and steel ready to kindle a fire, for on the roof stood the huge beacon which, once alight, would be seen for miles around.

In this room Hugo kept a big, shaggy dog of the deerhound breed. By some means it had crept into the castle, holding up a wounded paw and whining piteously, and the executioner had befriended the animal—not out of pity, but because he saw in those limbs made for strength and swiftness, and in the glistening teeth, better protection for a man than a coat of mail.

"Down, Damon, down!" Hugo said as he hobbled into the room and the brute rose to greet him. "Whining, eh? Are you hungry? There," opening a cupboard and pitching down a chunk of underdone beef, "is your dinner, so be satisfied."

Damon pounced on the meat, weighing fully two pounds, and in a few moments had devoured every shred.

"Now, come with me," said Hugo. "I have work for you, Damon, that will be to your liking. You shall keep watch and ward over as goodly a prisoner as ever came to the Red Tower; and if he attempts to escape, or even move towards the door, I give you leave to fly at his throat and keep your fangs fixed there just as long as you can without killing him."

The huge brute followed Hugo to a room below, where Augustin Hartford had been placed. The young man was sitting on a bench.

"I have brought a playmate for you," the executioner said; "and I promise that you will find him an attentive one. Damon, watch him!"

The dog turned its head and blinked at its master, and then lolling out its great tongue sat glaring at Hartford.

Hugo laughed hoarsely as he quitted the room.

"No need for cords or chains while Damon is with him," he said. "If he moves but the space of a foot the dog will bring him to the floor."

For some time after the executioner's departure Hartford and the dog remained in the same attitudes, and then a strange thing happened. Suddenly Damon placed his paws on the

young man's knees, and then raising his body licked his face and whined in a friendly manner.

CHAPTER 2.

Bad News for Robin Hood.

SWEET and solemn were the sounds of closing day.

The mighty forest thrilled with them, for from tree to tree the birds sang their lays to the setting sun, and even when twilight threw a soft mantle over the scene the music in the air went on.

But at last all was done, and silence fell upon the forest, save where the marten and badger stole, and the wily stoat and weasel glided in the track of some doomed rabbit or hare.

Suddenly the sound of a horn rang out and awoke a hundred echoes. Then there came crawling along the ground a misty light, like a lazy will-o'-the-wisp. It grew brighter as the breeze fanned it, and shone upon the willowy form of a fair girl with two splendid deerhounds at her heels.

The light travelling backwards flashed upon another form, that of a man with a bare sword in his hand, and a yew bow slung upon his back.

"Surely," said the girl, placing her hand upon her palpitating heart, "that must be Robin's signal."

"None other, I trow, good mistress," the man replied; "but let us be quite certain before we answer. Give me the lantern, and I will go forward. Stand you here near this tree with the hounds. They will not allow a Norman to come within fifty paces of you."

"Ever unselfish, Will Scarlet," Maid Marian said. "How true, good, and watchful you have been to us poor women since Robin went away! Listen! there goes the horn again. It is the foresters' call, and yet it sounds somewhat strange to me."

Will Scarlet thrust the lantern into a bush, so as to completely conceal the light, and drawing himself erect put his hand to his ear and listened.

"It has a strange sound, I confess," he said. "Tell me how the hounds are behaving. In this darkness I cannot see an inch before my nose."

"They are trembling with excitement," Maid Marian replied.

"You have them on the leash now?"

"Yes."

"Then keep them so. Hector and Vulcan will remain quiet while you are near, my mistress. Put a firm hand on them, lest they should attack a friend instead of a foe."

Then sinking down, Will Scarlet laid his ear flat to the ground.

"This passes my comprehension," he said, rising. "I hear but the sound of one horse's feet. I'll intercept this stranger, who doubtless has wandered from his path. Trust me, there is not a Norman in England who durst come into Robin Hood's kingdom."

Even as he spoke another horn sounded from a different part of the forest, and so amazed was Will Scarlet that he started and felt the blood course hotly through his veins.

"Mistress," he said, "I pray you go back with the hounds. Robin Hood is advancing from the north, but this stranger comes from the south."

Snatching up the lantern, he retraced his footsteps to where the leafy head of a stunted tree bowed to the ground. He pulled aside the lower branches, and Maid Marian, stooping, disappeared with the hounds.

Then turning his face to the north, Will Scarlet lifted his horn to his lips and blew three times upon it. He allowed an interval of a few seconds between each call, and then wound up with a prolonged shrill note.

Robin Hood would know what it meant. The prolonged note was the signal that strangers were near.

No sooner had Will Scarlet performed this duty than he dropped on one knee and strained his senses of sight and hearing to their utmost.

He had not long to wait. Soon through the trees there came little flashes of light, dancing fantastically hither and thither, then the tramp of men and horses, and presently Will Scarlet discerned the torch-bearers heralding the home-coming of Robin Hood and his merry men.

But how different from the return of Osbert de Grayle!

There were spoils of the chase and some trophies torn from the clutches of some thieving tyrant, but no wretched women and children with bound arms, and faces with despair and death written on them.

Indeed, Robin Hood had not brought a single prisoner with him. He had contented himself with striking, as he always did, swift, sharp, and sure, and now he was returning to one of his mysterious haunts in the forest to greet the woman he loved, and, as he hoped, to rest awhile.

Just behind the torch-bearers came Little John, mounted on a powerful black horse, with his invincible axe over his shoulder, and a smile covering the expanse of his great, bearded face.

At his side rode Friar Tuck, on his ever faithful ass, Balaam.

Little John and the merry monk were poking fun at each other as they rode along, and such was the desire of each to score a point that at times their voices were raised as if in an angry dispute.

"My faith!" said Robin Hood, riding up to them, "I shall have to part you; for ever squabbling over trifles."

"Fear not, Robin," quoth Friar Tuck. "Little John and I are the best of friends."

"None stauncher in all the world," said the giant, with a waggish roll of his immense head.

They were hastening forward now, for they had heard Will Scarlet's signal telling them that strangers were nigh, and that the gallant young forester was perplexed.

Will Scarlet did not come bounding to meet them, as Robin Hood expected, but he forgot him in the moment of his great joy when Maid Marian threw her arms round his neck and welcomed him home with a kiss.

Other sweethearts and wives greeted the men they loved best in all the world, and the scene was one of rejoicing and animation.

"For you, Marian, I have a necklace and girdle curiously wrought in gold," Robin Hood said; "ay, and laces, too, bought with money taken from the Normans. Besides, I have much to tell you,

fairest and best of sweethearts, and—— By St. Anthony! I had quite forgotten Will Scarlet whom I left behind to guard you! Where is he?"

"If you mean the swain in the red hose," said a voice, "he follows on with my horse and one called Martin Steyne, who craves a favour of you."

The outlaw started as he saw a tall, handsome man standing at his side.

The stranger's flowing moustache blended with his almost golden beard. The tan of the sun was on his cheeks, and his large eyes, deep and blue, danced merrily. He wore light armour on his shoulders, forearms, and thighs, the rest of his body being covered with a thick crimson cloth.

"In the name of the Seven Mysteries, who are you?" demanded Robin Hood.

"Alfred Dickson, at your service," the stranger replied. "I was a soldier, and now I am anything you like to call me. What! angry with me for losing my way and helping a poor man along? Well, then, I will depart, and on foot, for my horse is tired and in want of a meal, as I am, too. But what does it matter? I've gone hungry so many times that another empty stomach will not drive me to despair."

"No man is ever sent away hungry when Robin Hood has anything to share with him," the King of Sherwood Forest replied. "Your face is strange, but your voice sounds familiar to me. Ho, there, Allan-a-Dale! Blindfold this stranger and conduct him to our dining-hall."

Alfred Dickson submitted good-humouredly enough, and as he was taken to the underground retreat Will Scarlet appeared, supporting a man who looked more dead than alive.

The sufferer was the man named Martin Steyne. Alfred Dickson had encountered him a little time before, dragging his weary limbs through the forest in search of Robin Hood. Dickson had helped Steyne by putting him on the back of his (Dickson's) horse; and so they had gone forward until they had come upon Will Scarlet.

"Robin Hood," groaned Steyne now, "let me kneel before you while I tell you the story of my wrongs!"

"Tell me your story without kneeling," Robin said. "This is not a court where men and women vie with each other in mincing and mewing for royal favour."

"Osbert de Grayle," Martin Steyne said, "has been foraging. A hundred heaps of ashes and charred timbers mark where a hundred houses stood. The Norman has stolen our horses, sheep, and cattle; but, worse still, he has stolen men, too surely doomed, and women and children."

"The villain!" cried Robin Hood. "So he has done all this, knowing that I was away?"

"Even so," Steyne replied. "Doubtless he makes fine sport of what he calls a victory."

"The cur shall die!" hissed the outlaw chief as he paced to and fro.

So wild and terrible were his eyes that Maid Marian laid her hand pleadingly on his arm.

"Robin, dearest," she said, "I beg of you to be calm."

"Calm!" he replied. "Rage fills my soul, and calls it to arms. Did not Osbert de Grayle send me word that if I kept from Derby he would respect King Richard's command that the Saxons were to have equal rights? Did he not even say that he would meet me under a banner bearing the emblem of the Cross, to sign a charter, dividing this forest between us and the Normans, so that there might be no more strife? Ay, and he swore it, too, and now, villain-like, he has broken his vow. But say on, Master Steyne; you have brought me news that has set my heart on fire. Tell me now, what is your own grievance?"

"Osbert de Grayle has stolen my daughter Ruth," the man replied. "I was away at the time when he and his varlets came ravaging the land, or death should have claimed my child rather than she had fallen into his hands."

"Unhappy father! unhappy girl!" Robin Hood said. "But listen! Your wrongs shall be avenged. Give me but time to rest these weary bones of mine, and I'll bring this perjured Norman to book, though the walls of his castle be

as thick as this forest is wide. I swear it by the Cross that I adore! Much! Good Much, see to our friend here. Give him food, wine, and better clothes. I'll with you presently."

CHAPTER 3.

A Distinguished Guest.

Down a winding path under the roots of the stunted tree, Much the Miller's son led Martin Steyne.

And presently the weary man found himself in a spacious well-lit cave, with long tables flanked with benches, running down the middle.

At the end was an immense kind of sideboard laden with viands, huge stacks of loaves, while deep recesses near at hand revealed many casks of ale and light wine.

Women, girls, and lads were bustling about, getting a meal ready for the hungry foresters, who, in anticipation of the feast, had already bared their gleaming hunting-knives.

This mighty cave lay almost at the foot of the celebrated High Peak, to which in those days the forest extended.

Alfred Dickson looked curiously on at the scene. His graceful bearing and splendid physique attracted attention wherever he went, and so much at home did he make himself that he roamed hither and thither at will, asking questions of the foresters, chatting to the women, and joking with the lads.

"My simple child," said Friar Tuck, pinching Little John's arm, "what make you of this stranger? He has too honest a face to be a spy."

"A spy! not he," the giant replied, dropping the head of his axe within an inch of the friar's toes and causing him to skip backwards. "He is some soldier of fortune, who, having got rid of his money, came hither, and not by accident, let me tell you."

"Just my opinion," said Friar Tuck, closing one eye and focussing Dickson with the other. "Think you that he has given his right name?"

"I swear he has not," Little John replied. "But what does it matter so long as he be a true man and will enlist with Robin Hood?"

"Humph! Methinks that when he declares himself, some of you will be more surprised than I."

Just then Robin Hood, with Maid Marian on his arm, appeared, and it was the signal for the foresters to seat themselves at the table.

"Friend Dickson," said Robin Hood, "you are my honoured guest. So, come, sit with me, and when the edge of your appetite grows dull tell me your story."

"By St. George, little enough have I to tell, but of hard knocks given and taken, of travel by sea and land, yet always a yearning to return to Old England."

So spoke Dickson as he carved a goodly slice from a round of beef placed before him.

Robin Hood looked earnestly at him, and then exchanged wistful glances with Maid Marian.

"Are these all your men?" Dickson asked after a pause.

"By no means," the outlaw replied. "I can summon a thousand and more."

"And without fear of treachery?"

"That is a word my followers do not know the meaning of," Robin Hood replied. "Each man is a nobleman by nature; for truth, honour, and valour make a nobleman."

"I wonder if King Richard could find so many in the land?" Dickson said, breathing a sigh.

"Among the poor—yes, and fifty thousand added to them," Robin Hood responded. "Among the rich—no; for they only seek rank, favour, and power to grab the land and crush the poor under their iron heels."

"You speak harshly of the rich."

"Have I not reason?" the outlaw exclaimed. "Go where you will, and you shall hear but one bitter cry. It travels through the length and breadth of England, and rises to Heaven: 'Give us freedom and the right to live, as men have right to live, and we will ask no more.' Such is the prayer uttered morn, noon, and night. Surely you cannot be blind to the awful injustice practised in the name of the law?"

"By the splendour of heaven, I know but little of what is going on," Alfred

Dickson said. "But three weeks ago I landed in Dover, after suffering imprisonment in a foreign land. But where is the king? Why does he not redress these wrongs?"

"Well may you ask where the king hides," Robin Hood rejoined. "When he came to the throne the people burst into one song of joy because Richard was English-born. But since he was called to the Holy Land to fight the Saracens the Saxons have known neither rest nor peace."

"And you are their champion?"

"Call me so, if you will," Robin Hood said. "My father was brutally murdered, hanged over the door of his own house by Guy of Gisborne and Oswald de Burgh; but I thank Heaven for letting me live to rid the world of both."

"I hear that something has happened at Derby," Alfred Dickson said.

"Many things have happened," Robin Hood replied. "But I have a hundred-headed monster to deal with. Oh, if Richard the Lion-Hearted could but free himself of the traitors at his Court. He has but recently returned, and I am yet hopeful that he will e'en help the poor and oppressed. Know you aught of the king?"

"I saw him many times before the walls of Acre and Palestine," Dickson replied, with a far-away look in his eyes. "I saw him in the fulness of his health and strength, and I saw him lying in his tent sick almost unto death. And then—why tell of it?—I fell sick myself, travelled homeward, fell captive, and was cast into prison."

"Not in Austria?" demanded Robin Hood, trembling from head to foot.

"If I named any other place I should speak falsely."

"Then you are the king!" Robin Hood thundered, starting to his feet. "By Hengist and Horsa, I knew your voice, but your beard deceived me!"

One and all the foresters started up, with a shout that had never been heard before in the cave. Then an impressive silence fell upon all, and he who had called himself Alfred Dickson rose slowly to his feet.

"Yes," he said, "I am your king, and it was my intention to come entirely

alone among you. For so impressed was I when last I visited you in your stronghold after the tournament at Nottingham that I would fain learn more of your doings and this boast of yours that you are righting wrongs done in my absence. At my Court I am told that you did but deceive me. You are called rebels and accused of treason, but it seems to me that the treason lies elsewhere. Richard knows how to punish as well as reward; and I swear that if injustice has been done it shall be righted, no matter at what cost! Look to it, Robin Hood! If you have spoken sooth, no soldier bearing the royal arms shall lift a hand against your archers. But if, as it has been said, you pose as a champion for the sake of plunder, you shall repent the day you were born."

"And I swear that if I have spoken falsely I will bend my neck to the axe, as I bend my knee to you, my gracious king."

A mighty shout went up, and then every man, woman, and child of that strange assembly saluted the king.

"And now," said Richard, raising his hand as a signal for all to rise, "we will have no more talk of rights and wrongs, for since you have compelled me to declare myself, I pray you treat me in like manner as when I first sat in your midst. I have heard," he added, turning to Maid Marian, "that the Saxon maidens are as charming of voice as they are fair of face and form. So I pray, when the feast is done, let us have some minstrelsy."

What more could be desired? What happier speech could have been made? Weariness, care, the smart of wounds, the aching of bones brought on by resting in swamps and under dripping trees—all were forgotten, and a great joy abounded.

The king was talking to Robin Hood when, feeling a hand upon his shoulder, he turned and beheld the ruddy, expansive face of Friar Tuck, looking like a young harvest moon rising over a hill in a mist.

"Pardon, you majesty," he said, "but I knew you all the time, only I did not like to say so."

"Trust a monk for finding out secrets," Richard replied, laughing. "I drink to you, merry friar, and may the day that your arms fail to wield the quarter-staff be far distant."

"A man needs a quarter-staff to support his feeble limbs," Friar Tuck replied.

"Feeble limbs!" cried the king. "I trow there is not a stouter man in my kingdom than yourself. But, 'fore Heaven, I will try a bout with you, an you will, before the music salutes our ears."

"Your majesty's command to a man of peace is law," replied the friar.

"But, I pray you, be not too hard on me," said the king. "I have heard of your prowess, and will be content with one blow that will stretch me on my back."

"Soul of my father!" said Little John. "This is a nice state of things! The king and a humble friar banging each other about with pieces of wood. I never heard the like before. I must be dreaming!"

In a twinkling some of the tables were carried away and a space cleared.

"Send a man hither to help me remove these pieces of armour," the king said. "Richard would scorn to take his bitterest foe at a disadvantage, and this is to be a friendly bout, without anger or malice in it."

"Take care of your crown, friar," said Will Scarlet. "It shines to-night like a well-polished platter, and makes an excellent mark."

"Stand back, you boy with red legs," retorted Friar Tuck. "Ho, there! Bring two quarter-staves, and let the king choose the one best to his liking."

"It matters not which," Richard said, taking the first staff offered him and twirling it over his head. "I know honest faces when I see them. Now, friar, look to yourself, for I am no novice in the art."

All crowded round to see the bout, and a breathless silence reigned as the combatants, so strangely matched, stepped forward to meet each other.

For some moments they stood perfectly still, clutching the staves firmly and watching each other's eyes.

Suddenly there was a movement on the part of Friar Tuck, his wrists seemed to revolve in their sockets, and his quarter-staff hissed in the air.

One end beat down the king's guard, and the other whizzed over his head, missing him by the narrowest shave.

"A splendid try," exclaimed the king, leaping out of reach; "and for it, friar, I promise you the weight of your staff in gold."

"It shall go forthwith into Robin Hood's coffers," Friar Tuck replied. "For gold I have but little use. Give me bed and board to the end of my days, and I shall die content."

"So shall it be," said the king. "And now at you again!"

In modern parlance, Friar Tuck "came up smiling," but wary, for he knew that he had no mean combatant to contend with, and that King Richard intended to do his best.

Toe to toe they stood, staves crossed, motionless and watchful.

Again the friar took the initiative; but alas! for him. Expanding his broad chest, the king shot forth his arms, and then—thwack! the quarter-staff went down, and so did the redoubtable friar.

When Little John picked him up, dazed and glassy-eyed, there was a bump as large as a turkey's egg on his head, and still growing.

"By my faith!" the friar said, good-humouredly, as soon as he could fetch his breath, "I have never seen or felt better play. King, an you liked you could have killed me."

"Give me your hand, you worthy man," said the king, adding, with a smile, "unless you would like to try another bout."

"Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof," the friar replied.

This was greeted with a roar of laughter, during which Little John whispered something in the friar's ear.

"I was hard hit," Friar Tuck said, giving himself a shake much after the fashion of a dog after leaping out of the water, "yet I will alter my mind and claim my revenge."

"Willingly," the king replied. "May the best man win."

There was a glint of determination

in the friar's eyes as he squared up for another bout, and no sooner had he touched the mark than he caught Richard a sounding blow on the side of the head.

"One good turn deserves another," said the king. "How is that, worthy friar?"

With the words he struck a blow that took Friar Tuck completely by surprise and brought him to the ground with such force that his sandalled feet went up in the air.

"Little John," he said, opening his eyes and looking unsteadily around him, "I pray you carry me away to where I keep my stock of healing herbs. Call me a warrior no more, for I will be a man of peace indeed."

"But you will come back and sit among us," said Richard. "Ay, and you shall sit at my side, too. The king commands it."

"My faith!" Friar Tuck said as Little John raised him in his arms. "How they laugh! Robin Hood, Maid Marian, and all, down to the boy who serves me with razor and shaving water. I am undone. Give me my quarter-staff, that I may break it over my knee."

"Tush, friar! you will be all right presently and ready for more fun," Little John said.

A poultice of herbs soon reduced the swelling, and under the influence of some hot mulled wine Friar Tuck soon began to see his misfortune in a brighter light, and was at last induced to return to the joyous assembly.

To make matters still better, he was received with tremendous cheering, and the king, grasping his hand, said:

"Why, friar, I stand head and shoulders over you, and it is a wonder that you had the courage to face me."

By this time Marian had fetched her lyre, and she sang most charmingly. Then other songs followed, and then the ladies retired; but the night was far spent before the men went to their couches of thickly-spread rushes.

Next day King Richard went from the foresters as mysteriously as he had come, and none knew whither he went.

Robin Hood set himself to the task of outwitting the tyrant of Derby Castle.

CHAPTER 4.

Hugo in his Cups.

THROUGH the streets of Derby town Hugo the executioner slouched and hobbled. Everyone made room for him, and shuddered at the instrument of vengeance and cruelty embroidered on his arm.

Hugo was pleased with the hatred that his presence inspired. It delighted him, because he knew that under the hatred lay a terrible fear.

It was only necessary for some poor wretch to be accused of denouncing the Normans of high degree, particularly Prince John, to make a short acquaintance with the executioner's block.

Hugo's favourite house of entertainment was known as "The Wheel," for it reminded him of the wretched victims that were often broken on that horrible instrument of torture.

"The Wheel" was kept by one Walbert, a surly, cross-grained fellow, a paid spy, and an inveterate liar. He had few customers, but he contrived to thrive and grow burly.

When Hugo pushed open the door and dragged his legs along the sanded floor, two men were sitting in the room used by the customers. One, with a great jack of ale before him, was huddled into a corner and apparently sound asleep. The other sat near the hearth, upon which a few sticks were burning, for the purpose of boiling a great pot of water.

"Walbert," said Hugo, leering at him from under his red, bushy eyebrows, "these men are strangers to Derby; know you aught of them?"

"Nothing but that they are drovers bringing cattle for sale at to-morrow's market," Walbert replied. "They have stalled under the shed in the yard three milch-cows and as many heifers."

"Do they stay the night here?"

"Beyond a doubt, for drovers do not care to be too far away from their cattle."

"Humph!" Hugo growled, with a lowering glance at the two men, "have they given you their names?"

"Nay; why should they, so long as they pay for their fare in good coin?"

"I'll question them. We must find out who they are, for we know not in what disguise our enemies may come."

"True," Walbert said, rolling his head from side to side. "Yet methinks you are mistaken this time, friend Hugo. Think of the milch-cows and heifers. Were these men Saxon spies they would not bring such valuable stock with them."

While Walbert was drawing some liquor Hugo loved best, the executioner sat beside the man near the hearth.

This man appeared to be past the middle age. His long hair was flaxen, and his face a deep brown by comparison, as was often the case with people who lived almost entirely out of doors.

A heavy stick lay across his knees, and one hand rested upon where he had carved it into the shape of a ram's head.

"My honest man, will you drink with me?" Hugo asked.

"I have drink of my own," replied the man, pointing to the table. "Moreover, let me tell you that I drink only with my friends; but I thank you all the same."

"Well, then," said Hugo, laughing, "I will drink with you."

"Why, so you shall," replied the stranger good-humouredly. "Sit you still while I fetch some more ale."

Having interviewed Walbert on the matter, he returned with a foaming flagon and handed it to the executioner.

"Whence come you?" Hugo demanded after he had drunk deeply.

"From Bakewell," the man replied. "Are you a buyer of beasts?"

"No," Hugo whispered in his ear; "I am a killer of beasts—two-legged beasts who rebel against the State."

As he spoke he held out his arm so that the stranger might see the figure of the axe.

The man sat unmoved. Hugo thought that he would edge away from him; but the stranger sat perfectly still and smiled.

"You look fat and well; your calling seems to suit you," he said.

"It is the only one to my taste," Hugo replied. Then, pointing to the other man asleep in the corner: "Who is he?"

"My master."

"His name?"

"My faith! you are inquisitor as well as executioner!" said the man. "Ask him yourself."

"Well, then, your own name?"

"Henry Stephenson. But why these questions from you?"

"Because I serve Osbert de Grayle and have a right to ask," Hugo replied. "My friend, I advise you to keep a civil tongue in your head, or perchance you will see inside the lower walls of Derby Castle."

"By Thor! we live in strange times," Stephenson said. "I am here on my master's business. There he sits; speak to him if you will."

Hugo slipped from the bench, and, crossing the room, shook the other man.

"What now?" the rudely-awakened one cried. "Death of my life, who are you to grab a man by the shoulder? Out of my sight, you bloated toad!"

"I'll have your ears for those words!" Hugo hissed. "I'll see to it, never fear. Bloated toad! By Pluto! I believe you are a Saxon, and a bad one at that."

"A man cannot help his birth," was the reply. "Had I been born a Norman, and possessed coffers full of stolen money, you would humble yourself in the very dust at my feet. Ha! You wear the emblem of death on your sleeve. Bloodstained wretch! pollute me with another touch, and I will fell you to the earth!"

"Enough! enough!" cried Hugo. "The man who insults me insults my noble master. Look to yourself; I will denounce you in the market-place to-morrow."

"And so you shall, and say that I am Sedgewick, the son of a Saxon franklin, free, and as well-born as any Norman in the land."

"Come, come!" said Walbert, appearing in the doorway. "Let us have no disturbance. I think you are going a little too far, Master Hugo. For all you and I know these men may be honest enough."

Hugo turned savagely upon the host.

"You are thinking more of what these men will pay than what they really are," he said. "Get you about your

business, and leave me to look after mine."

"Willingly," said Walbert. "What ails you to-night, Master Hugo? Your eyes glare, and your breath comes short and quick. I fear me that you had been drinking before you came here. So sit you down and be at ease."

"It's a lie!" Hugo replied, staggering across the floor. "I have had no more than my usual quantity. Where is the ale I ordered?"

"Here, beside what you have left of mine," Stephenson said.

Hugo stretched out his hand, made a wild clutch at the measure, and upset it, the liquor streaming to the floor.

Walbert did not wait to hear the string of imprecations that came from Hugo's mouth, but walked away, and presently Stephenson and Sedgewick passed into the yard, and, having littered the cattle down for the night, walked into the street.

Hugo did not call for more ale. Placing his elbow on the table, he leaned his head heavily upon it and fell asleep.

Walbert came in and looked at the executioner.

"I was right," he said. "Hugo is in his cups. He will be in a better temper when he wakes."

Quite two hours passed before the executioner opened his eyes and shuffled to his feet.

"I will go," he said, fumbling in his wallet. "Death take me if I know what ails me. Where is the key of the postern? Fool that I am! I must have left it in the Red Tower; but it matters little. I'll remain here for the night. Ho, there, Walbert! Show me to a room. I have locked myself out of the castle, and, as you know, the draw-bridge is never raised after sundown."

Walbert was glad to do anything to keep his savage customer quiet, and conducted him up a flight of stairs.

Without removing a single garment Hugo flung himself on the bed, and waved his hand to Walbert to retire.

"What dreams must come to him," the host muttered in his beard. "I hate the brute, but he is useful to me. Sleep on, pig! Sleep on."

CHAPTER 5.

A Setback for Osbert de Grayle.

DURING Hugo's absence from the castle Osbert de Grayle betook himself to the dungeon in which Margaret Woolrych had been thrust. He went alone, armed with sword and dagger, for he was anxious to hear what the old woman had to say about the hidden treasure.

"Margaret Woolrych," he said, closing the door and standing near it, "you spoke certain things to me concerning a secret you had discovered."

"Well? It is true—what then?" said Margaret Woolrych. "It is not likely to serve me much; and as for you, you are rich enough, without seeking for more wealth."

"Still noisy-tongued," the Norman said sternly. "You affect a courage you do not possess. It is like a woman. She can rave and storm, but her heart gives way at the sight of blood."

"Tyrant, try me," Margaret Woolrych cried. "I have locked the angel of death so often in the face that I shall not shrink from the touch of his cold hand!"

"Listen: If I spare your life will you tell me where the treasure is buried?"

"Norman, I will not trust you," Margaret Woolrych replied. "Give me my liberty first—give me your bond, with and by your hand, that I am never again to be molested, and then——"

"And then you will tell me?" Osbert de Grayle replied, drawing closer.

"The treasure is so strangely placed that such information as I can impart would be useless," Margaret Woolrych replied. "I, and I alone, can guide a man to the place."

"Name it, then."

"Not I, did you tear me to pieces inch by inch," the old woman replied.

"Would you go with me as the price of your life and freedom?" Osbert de Grayle asked.

"Why should I? Once I revealed the secret, you would order your men to hack me to pieces."

"There shall be no man with us," the Norman said. "I do not trust my retainers too far."

"Because while they fawn at your feet they hate you in their hearts."

"That matters not," Osbert de Grayle said, frowning darkly. "Give me an answer—yes or no."

"I must have time to think. Give me three days. Set me free from this awful place. Let me roam at will about the castle, and I swear by all that I hold holy I will not attempt to escape."

"Granted," replied Osbert de Grayle, flinging open the dungeon door. "Get you to the Red Tower, and I will send a woman to you who shall appoint you a room. But keep your word, for Hugo and his terrible dog Damon will always be close at hand. In three days I will send for you, and if your answer is to my liking you shall conduct me to the hidden treasure. Refuse, and you shall eke out the rest of your existence in misery and agony."

Margaret Woolrych clapped her hands and ran past Osbert de Grayle.

"I knew that the love of life and liberty would prove too great for her," he muttered. "I have conquered her. The treasure will be mine, and then I will gather about me such an army as to defy the king himself."

Outside in the darkened corridor he found Margaret Woolrych, standing as if in doubt.

"There are armed men yonder," she said. "Will they let me pass?"

"I had forgotten to give any instructions," the Norman said. "Come with me; I will conduct you to the Red Tower myself."

Ten minutes later Osbert de Grayle betook himself to the northern wing of the castle, where he had ordered Ruth Steyne to be detained. His admiration had been aroused by the girl's lovely face and form, and now he was going to her with a honeyed tongue to make her an offer of marriage.

He had ordered Ruth to be placed in a dungeon used for distinguished prisoners. It was a well lighted and fairly furnished apartment, but so strong withal as to banish all hope of escape. The windows were protected with thick bars, and placed in such a position that the sentry on the ramparts could not fail to see anyone near them.

tention there and then of summoning Robin Hood and Little John to the Hall of Death, there to announce the sentence his evil heart had devised.

"Hugo," he said, speaking painfully through his broken teeth, "have these rebels brought before me without delay, and if I do not strike terror into their souls, may I perish, as I intend they shall."

Hugo hastened away, and collecting a number of men went to the underground dungeon in which Robin Hood and Little John lay, heavily chained.

"My lord and master desires the pleasure of your company," Hugo said, grinning. "Some damage has been done, but the recompense will be sweet. Ho, there, men; bring them along, and smartly, too. Osbert de Grayle awaits their coming in the Hall of Death."

He stepped into the corridor to repeat his call, and while he thundered, Robin Hood and Little John were able to speak to each other with none else to hear.

"Chief," said Little John, "if you are weary, lean on me. These chains gall my flesh, but otherwise they trouble me not."

"Nay, I am well able to support myself," Robin Hood replied. "Poor John! I fear I have got you into serious trouble at last."

"Think not of it. This castle is strong, but still stronger ones have fallen before the blows of our friends."

"Alas! they do not number more than a hundred near at hand. The rest are in our beloved Forest of Sherwood. It galls me to think how near we were to capturing that villain; but, thank Heaven, Ruth Steyne and Augustin Hartford are free!"

"And Allan-a-Dale, too!"

Several men-at-arms came into the dungeon then, and the prisoners were dragged to the Hall of Death, Hugo taking the lead, and looking now and then over his shoulder as if he could not feast his eyes sufficiently on them.

In the great, sombre, dimly-lit chamber, where so many victims had perished, Osbert de Grayle sat groaning with pain.

Robin Hood and Little John were taken to the raised platform and marched round the block.

"Have done with this foolery!" Robin Hood said. "Our hearts will not quail at the sight of engines of death. How fares it with you, Osbert de Grayle?"

"The noble Norman looks as if he had fallen downstairs," Little John laughed. "It is a pity that so much manly beauty should be spoiled."

"Marry!" cried Osbert de Grayle, writhing in his agony and fury, "I will spoil your beauty soon, and leave it as black as any ashes that ever fell from fire. Listen to me, hounds!"

"Your hounds are in the courtyard of the castle," Little John said. "We are men."

"You are traitors and robbers," Osbert de Grayle hissed.

"To such men as you we are traitors, indeed; and were it in my power I would take every groat you possess," Robin Hood retorted. "Say on, fiend! We are bound to listen, but the time may come when you will be fain to listen to us."

"You shall perish by slow fire outside the castle, and in the full view of the people," Osbert de Grayle said. "Robin Hood, and you, Little John, I have heard that you are bold men. We shall see how you bear the torture before your eyes close in death."

"I did not expect so much clemency at your hands," Robin Hood retorted. "Innocent men, women, and children have suffered as much, while you stood by gibing at them. But your turn is to come, base wretch!"

"Away with them!" Osbert de Grayle said. "Give them neither food nor water. I will appoint the day and hour for their torture."

"We are in luck," Little John whispered. "Methought the wretch would order us to be thrown to the bloodhounds or leopards. We have suffered thirst and starvation before, and will do so now with cheerful hearts."

"You are like a sunbeam bursting through storm-clouds, honest John," Robin Hood replied. "Come what may, we will live and die like men."

Once more they were placed in the dungeon, and the great door crashed after them.

Outside, armed men tramped and talked to each other in low tones.

"'Twill be a miracle even now if we keep the prisoners," said one. "'Tis said among the common folk that Robin Hood and certain of his men have guardian spirits that protect them."

The man spoken to laughed.

"I'll believe it when I see the guardian spirits open the walls to let them through," he replied. "There is no stronger or better garrisoned castle in England than this. Take my word for it, Robin Hood and Little John have come here to die."

The prisoners paced up and down the dungeon. It was a loathsome place, black, and deadly cold; but Robin Hood and the giant were accustomed to make the best of adverse circumstances.

Now and then the guards outside heard them laughing, and flattened their ears against the door to hear what they were talking about, but without success.

"I fear," Little John was saying, "that poor Friar Tuck's head will be too big for his cowl for some time. Yet the old man fought well."

"He will fight better when he and my merry men come to the castle, be we dead or alive."

"Every moment is of advantage to us," said Little John. "We number but a hundred near Derby, it is true, but 'twill be easy enough to raise twice that number of volunteers. Osbert de Grayle has so oppressed the people that it needs but a spark to set their fury into a flame."

"The poor are always yearning to avenge their wrongs," Robin Hood replied; "but they can do but little for themselves. Such tyrants as De Grayle take care to see that they are badly armed."

The captives talked thus for awhile, and then the outlaw chief flung himself at full length on a damp, stone bench.

"I'll to sleep," he said, "and dream that I am holding my court under the

greenwood tree. Sweet Marian, breathe a prayer for me. Foresters of Sherwood, one and all, my heart goes out to you."

CHAPTER 7.

A Council of War.

"Hush! This way. Tread lightly, and speak not."

So spoke Allan-a-Dale as he led Ruth Steyne by the hand through brake and brier.

The girl made no murmur, although her dress was torn to tatters and her face was cruelly scratched.

Augustin Hartford brought up the rear. He and Ruth had been released by Robin Hood and hidden in a thicket before the foresters' presence in the castle had been discovered by Osbert de Grayle with such disastrous results. To them Allan-a-Dale had repaired when he escaped through the window of the dungeon. He had bidden them lay close while he tried to find out how Robin and Little John fared. He had learned nothing, however, and now, soon after break of day, the three were creeping away to the outlaws' secret haunt.

Suddenly Hartford stopped.

"Hist!" he said, under his breath. "Something is following us."

Patter, patter, patter. "What could it be?"

Perhaps a half-famished wolf, or a wild boar with sow and young in a lair close at hand, and ready to defend them with its terrible tusks.

That it was an animal of some kind was evident, for no human being would be likely to make such a noise.

Presently the gleam of two eyes appeared out of the darkness, the pattering ceased, but the eyes remained steady and fixed.

"It is upon us!" Hartford said. "Hasten on, good Allan-a-Dale! I will remain here and slay the beast if it comes nearer."

Even as he spoke there came a friendly whino, followed by a short, joyous bark. Damon the dog had followed in their tracks and overtaken them.

"Wonderful!" Hartford exclaimed.

"This poor beast has covered our retreat. The hand of Heaven is surely in this!"

"You must have power over animals," Allan-a-Dale said.

"'Twas said so; but I paid little attention to such talk," Hartford said. "But here is the dog, and he is welcome indeed!"

"I do not know how Hector and Vulcan will receive him," Allan-a-Dale said. "They are jealous of strangers."

Damon came up wagging his tail, and then fell back again.

Then all went on in silence. The precautions they had to take made the travelling slow, and night had once more fallen for some hours when they came at last to the tree communicating with the foresters' cave.

"Start not if you hear a voice presently," Allan-a-Dale whispered in Ruth's ear. "We shall be challenged."

The challenge came almost immediately:

"Who goes there?"

The form of a stalwart forester, with arrow fixed and bow drawn, loomed out of the darkness.

"Friends," replied Allan-a-Dale.

"The password?"

"Sweet liberty or death!"

"Good! Pass on," said the forester.

"You are Allan-a-Dale. What has become of Robin and Little John?"

"Alas! I have a story of triumph and defeat to tell," Allan-a-Dale replied. "We have rescued the maiden and a youth, too; but our chief and Little John are prisoners in Derby Castle."

"Merciful Heaven!" the forester exclaimed. "That is the worst of news, for the number of our men is not only small, but they are short of shafts, which they have been busily making all day. How came you to enter the castle? It was understood that you were going to make observations."

"It is too long a story to tell now," Allan-a-Dale said. "We'll to the cave. This poor girl must be placed in Maid Marian's care, and a council of war held at once."

"Heaven support our great chief and Little John in their trial!" the forester said as he stood on one side.

Sleep had claimed all within the cave when the fugitives entered with Damon at their heels.

Hector and Vulcan, scenting a stranger of their own species, leaped up; but Allan-a-Dale quieted them somewhat, and they retired, growling and muttering in their own language, to their resting-places.

But Damon was not to be denied. He had come to be friendly with everything and everybody, and friendly he intended to be, whether Hector or Vulcan liked it or not, and for that purpose he lay down beside them to talk the matter over.

Soon came Maid Marian to take Ruth to her own quarters, and to tell her the joyous news that her father slept close at hand.

Then came the foresters, yawning and rubbing their eyes, but wide awake in a moment when they heard what had happened.

Trimming the lamps, they sat down in council.

Will Scarlet was for starting there and then, trusting to rouse the Saxon peasantry.

Friar Tuck rose and addressed the assembly:

"If a man of peace may give a few words of advice, I will utter them. We must go to work with great caution. Even were we strong enough to advance in force on Derby Castle, Robin Hood and Little John would be doomed. Osbert de Grayle would slay them immediately we appeared. Therefore, my children, we must trust to stratagem; and I am willing to go in advance with but one man—Will Scarlet by name—while the rest of you prepare for battle and follow on."

"That is sound advice," said Much the Miller's son; "but why should our good friar and Will Scarlet take all the risk?"

"Because numbers would betray and destroy us," Friar Tuck replied. "I am a man of peace, and not much known in this locality, and Will Scarlet, dressed as a shepherd, will scarcely arouse suspicion. Our object will be to find out what is happening, and fall back on you when we know. Methinks

that Osbert de Grayle is too fond of show to wreak his vengeance within the castle walls."

This plan was agreed to, and Will Scarlet hastened to get ready for the journey.

The friar required no preparation, save strapping a short, keen-edged sword under his cassock, and testing his trusty quarter-staff.

"By St. Anthony!" he said, "I pray that I do not meet with such another man as the king, or there will be an end of the man of peace altogether. Fill our wallets, Dick Carter, and let my beloved Balaam be brought forth. When I come to the end of the forest I will release him, and fear not but that he will find his way back again."

Within half an hour of the meeting of the foresters Friar Tuck and Will Scarlet were on the road.

Dark as was the night, they were thankful for it, and hoped that the great black clouds moving sullenly overhead would keep back the dawn until they came within sight of Derby Town.

They rode and walked in turn, for Friar Tuck obstinately refused to reserve Balaam to himself, and the ass behaved so remarkably well that never once did it elevate its heels, which was oftentimes its playful habit.

At length the time came to part with the sagacious animal.

"Get you back, dearest of creatures," Friar Tuck said, "and stop not to munch a single thistle, though it tempt you as a miser is tempted at the sight of gold. Balaam, look not so stupid, for you are an ass of sense and brain, and know full well what I am saying to you."

Balaam flicked his tail round and caught Friar Tuck lovingly on the side of his head. Then, with a knowing look in his eyes, he trotted away, and was soon lost to view.

CHAPTER 8.

Friar Tuck and Father Simon.

A DULL, drizzly morning broke over Derby, and it was not until a monastery bell began to toll that a single door was opened.

Walbert, the host of "The Wheel,"

was one of the first to be astir. Early customers called occasionally to seek shelter and refreshment in his none too pleasant house.

As he stood at the door he saw a cowed friar with bent head, apparently talking earnestly to a grave-faced shepherd.

"The friar is telling the shepherd that it is a sin to steal his master's sheep," Walbert muttered, grinning to himself. "Pah! I'll have none of the church or the prying father, but keep my secrets to myself."

"My son," said Friar Tuck to the shepherd as they drew near, "if it will please you to break your fast with me, willingly will I bear the expense."

"Father," Will Scarlet replied, "you are kind. I missed my master yesterday, and unhappily he left me without money."

"Say you so? Then we will enter this inn. The host has an honest face, and will not charge too much, I am sure."

Walbert stood aside to let them pass.

As Friar Tuck and Will Scarlet sat at the window nearest the road, a monk in grey, about the same stature as Tuck himself, passed.

"Friend host," Friar Tuck said, "who may that good priest be?"

"Oh, that is Father Simon," Walbert replied, laughing. "He is attached to Osbert de Grayle's castle; and, by Bacchus! I should think he has to listen to some pretty tales!"

"Peace, peace!" said Friar Tuck, rebukingly. "I would speak to Father Simon."

"No difficult matter that," Walbert responded. "He walks for hours on the hills every day; for methinks the air of the castle does not suit him."

"Thanks, friend," said the friar. "Here are three groats for your civility."

"Wonderfull!" exclaimed Walbert, holding up his hands. "Never has a friar, until you set foot over the threshold, come here to give, but to beg. If I were not a poor man, I would keep these groats as curiosities."

Will Scarlet did not take any part in this conversation, but sat listening to

it, with his mouth half-open, after the manner of a rustic clown. He, however, did not forget to eat his breakfast, and having finished, patted his chest, gave a short laugh, and rose to his feet.

"Shepherd," said Friar Tuck, "I will go yet a little further with you. You are young and strong, but I am old and weary, so lend me your arm."

Walbert followed them with his eyes.

"Three groats," he chuckled, rattling the coins in his pocket—"three groats, and from a friar, too! I'll turn religious, and alter the sign of my house to 'The Friar in Brown.'"

This so tickled the landlord that he went back to his house and treated himself to a drink and a hearty laugh afterwards.

In the meantime, Friar Tuck and Will Scarlet were wending their way in the direction Father Simon had taken.

Quick as thought a plan had flashed into Friar Tuck's mind, and Will Scarlet was so elated at it that he could scarcely refrain from patting the friar on the back in the open street.

Simon, little dreaming of what was about to happen, roamed among the pleasant hills. Now and then he turned his eyes towards Derby town, and more often still to Osbert de Grayle's castle.

Father Simon was not without money, and he was arguing in his mind whether it would not be better to seek office with a little less bloodthirsty nobleman, when he heard the strains of a shepherd's pipe, and Friar Tuck, with Will Scarlet about fifty yards behind him, appeared.

"Greeting, brother," Friar Tuck said. "The beautiful sun shines boldly to-day. Methought that another storm would burst; but the clouds are gone, and all nature smiles!"

"Of what Order are you?" demanded Father Simon, not without suspicion in his voice.

"Of the Order of Saint Augustin," Friar Tuck replied.

"What brings a Saint Augustin friar here?"

"An errand of mercy, good brother," was Tuck's reply. "See, this brown cassock of mine is good, while yours of

grey is old and torn. Brother, suppose we exchange cassocks, and, better still, suppose you rest here a few hours with this poor shepherd to look after you?"

"I know not what you mean."

"Father Simon," said the friar, throwing back his cowl and giving his quarter-staff a twirl, "I would not hurt you for worlds; but I am Friar Tuck, and I must have your cassock. Exchange is no robbery."

"But—but—"

"Dear me," Friar Tuck interrupted, "what a painful thing it is to have to talk to an obstinate man! Your cassock, or by Saint Anthony, I'll have it off your back in a trice! Moreover, be prepared to go where this good shepherd takes you!"

"You are rebels, and I shall be murdered," cried Simon, turning pale.

"Robin Hood's followers do not commit murder," Friar Tuck replied sternly. "They fight for the liberties of the people, while you—and shame on you for so doing—serve a villain. You are the rebel, the traitor, the Judas! Your cassock, or I will crack your head before taking it!"

Father Simon, trembling from head to foot, made haste to slip the garment over his shoulders. Friar Tuck went through a similar performance, and in a few moments the transformation was complete.

While it was going on Will Scarlet had thrown open his shepherd's smock and produced several yards of strong cord.

"What! would you bind me?" demanded Simon, aghast.

"I fear it will be needful," Friar Tuck replied. "Our good friend here will conduct you to some quiet place, and keep you company until I return. Brother, you should know of some secret bower or cave amid these hills."

The captive priest made no reply, but rolled up his eyes and sighed dismally.

"Silence gives consent," said Friar Tuck. "Shepherd, see that he takes you to one of these nooks, and there look to him. When the sun begins to take its westward course, return to this spot.

I fear that Father Simon must take a journey with us instead of going back to the castle."

At this Simon indulged in a loud groan, and a deeper groan still when Will Scarlet, clutching his arm, gave him a shake.

"Shepherd," Friar Tuck said, "take my staff. I will be content with my short sword, although I do not think I shall have any occasion to use it."

So saying, the friar walked away, cowl down, hands clasped before him, and imitating Father Simon's gait.

His way lay past "The Wheel." Walbert was standing at the door, and beckoned him in.

"Father Simon," he whispered, "have you seen a friar in a brown cassock, accompanied by a shepherd. They broke their fast here but an hour ago, and now that I think of it, they may be rebels in disguise."

"Say you so," muttered Friar Tuck. "Let me come within. Are you alone?"

"There is no other soul but myself in the house."

"That is good news," Friar Tuck replied as he followed the host into the room used by customers. And then aloud: "Say on."

"Most likely the friar and shepherd will return," Walbert said. "If so, I will drug them and send direct to the castle. Fool that I was not to have done so this morning, but a man cannot think of everything."

"True," Friar Tuck replied, imitating Father Simon's voice. "You have always done well."

"By Pluto!" said Walbert, laughing, "I have given Hugo plenty of work to do. I can count more than a dozen Saxons I have delivered to him for the torture and axe."

Friar Tuck flung back his cowl and, staring straight into Walbert's eyes, seized him by the throat and forced him against the wall.

"Murderer!" he said, "out of your own mouth you stand condemned. Not another Saxon shall you deliver to the executioner if it be in my power to prevent it."

Walbert tried to shout for help, but he could only gurgle in his throat.

Relaxing his right hand, Friar Tuck dealt the villain two terrible blows with his clenched fist.

Walbert's face underwent an awful change, and, spreading out his arms, he sank slowly to the floor, the friar still holding him.

"If I have any knowledge of my own strength, those blows should be sufficient to kill him," muttered the wrathful monk. "Well, Heaven knows, he deserved it."

Leaving the innkeeper lying there, Friar Tuck pulled his cowl over his face and passed out of the back way into a narrow thoroughfare.

Here all was quiet, and he had time to think. So far his plan had succeeded, but there was still much to do. If Robin Hood and Little John were still alive, he would see them and bid them be of good cheer.

If they were dead he would take Osbert de Grayle's life, caring not what his own fate might be when the deed was done.

He now made his way direct to the castle.

On reaching the turret-shaped lodges, across which stretched a massive iron gate, Friar Tuck was received with marked reverence by the men on duty, for they firmly believed him to be Father Simon.

A horn was sounded, the drawbridge descended, and in less than two minutes the disguised monk had passed under the portcullis into the courtyard.

His blood ran cold at the sight of the bloodhounds and leopards, for he guessed only too truly for what purpose they were kept.

"Master Snayle has been asking for you with reference to the prisoners," a man said, advancing. "He thinks the services of a priest on their behalf might—"

"Yes, yes," Friar Tuck interrupted. "Send him to me; I will await him here."

Snayle came immediately he heard that Father Simon had returned.

"Think you," he said, drawing the friar aside, "that if you went to Robin Hood he would tell you where his treasure lies?"

"What?" cried Friar Tuck, startled at such a question.

"Pshaw!" Snayle sneered. "Do not affect to be shocked, for what are you—a renegade, an outcast from the monastery—better than I?"

"Why need remind me of it?" Friar Tuck demanded, much relieved. "Yes, yes; I will go to the prisoners and learn all I can. And then?"

"Why," Snayle said, with his mouth close to the friar's ear—"why should not you and I profit by the knowledge Robin Hood imparts? In two days' time the outlaw and the giant are to be publicly burnt by slow fire in the market-place."

"Then there is no time to be lost," Friar Tuck muttered through his closed teeth. "Who holds the keys of the dungeon?"

"Hugo, but he will let me have them for a consideration," Snayle replied.

"Hasten to him, and say that I will reward him well for his trouble," the friar said chokingly.

"Your voice is deep this morning," Snayle said.

"Even so. The grass is thick with dew, and I have taken cold. But away and fetch the keys; I will promise good news when I return."

Chuckling with glee, Snayle ran away and soon came back with the keys.

"You must give them back to me," he said, handing them to Tuck.

"I will," the friar replied in a rather confused state of mind, as he did not know where to find the dungeon.

"Come you with me, Master Snayle, and stand without the door. Lead on quickly, and I'll follow."

Snayle was more than agreeable, and not only acted as guide, but obligingly opened the dungeon door.

Father Simon at once entered, Snayle remaining outside.

"We want no priest connected with such a den of infamy as this," Robin Hood said.

"Nevertheless, it is my duty to speak to you," the friar replied. Then, lowering his voice to a whisper, and looking round to see that the door was closed, he added: "Robin—good Robin—and you, too. Little John. Hush!

You know me, but, for the love of Heaven, do not breathe my name. I am here to cheer you—here to tell you that you have two days' grace; and I am here with a wallet well filled. Hide the things you find in it under the straw in yonder corner."

In a transport of joy, Robin Hood and Little John fell on their knees, their chains clanking noisily.

Snayle heard the sound, and rubbed his hands.

"All is going well," he said, "Simon will have a rare secret to impart."

He would have changed his opinion if he could have heard what was being said.

"I go," Friar Tuck said, "to rally our forces and rouse the people. In two days much can be done. Oh, Robin, I had hope in my heart, and yet I feared that Osbert de Grayle had either slain or maimed you. But you shall have revenge."

"Oh, faithful friar," Robin Hood replied. "Oh, best of men, how can I repay you for this?"

"Not with thanks, for I need none," Friar Tuck replied. "Not with gold, for it is dross to me. Repay me with a smile and a grasp of your hand, and I will be satisfied."

After some conversation as to the safe return of Allan-a-Dale with Ruth Steyne, Augustin Hartford, and the wonderful story of the executioner's dog, Friar Tuck knocked at the dungeon door, signifying that he wished to depart.

Snayle turned the key, and Friar Tuck, stepping out, walked some distance without speaking.

"Have you succeeded?" Snayle asked, almost breathless with excitement.

"Only partly," Friar Tuck replied. "But fear not; all will go well. I am to see Robin Hood again to-morrow. Do not question me now. Such information as I have necessitates our taking a journey—you and I. Can you provide two horses by this evening?"

"As many as would serve us," Snayle responded joyfully. "I will have them ready outside the northern wall, if you will but name the hour."

"At six, then," Friar Tuck replied. "Having handed one of the horses over to me, you will ride out of the town, taking the eastern road, and halt at the foot of the hills. There I'll join you."

"Good! It would be better if we were not seen together."

"True! Go, now, and pay no further heed to me. See that the horses are swift and sound."

"You shall have Osbert de Grayle's own charger," Snayle said. "I'll not fail you."

"Nor will I you," thought the friar. "Really, I have done fairly for a man of peace."

"Father Simon" then passed out of the castle, and was seen no more that day.

The sun was sinking when Snayle brought two saddle-horses out of the northern gate and led them under the wall. He was mounted on one and led the other, giving as an excuse that he required the second horse for the use of a spy, who would return to the castle with him that evening with important information.

Friar Tuck was waiting by the northern wall and took the spare horse.

"Get you gone," he said. "I will soon be after you."

CHAPTER 9.

The Monk on his Mettle.

In the remote days of which we are writing, the clergy rode side-saddle, and the people of Derby town were considerably surprised to see Father Simon clattering through the streets, for the reason that never before had they seen him on horseback.

But things were in such a state at the castle that they were ready for anything, and highly commended the worthy priest for the masterly manner in which he held the reins.

With mingled feelings of joy and rage in his heart, Friar Tuck held his course, and soon came up with Snayle, who, receiving him with almost open arms, asked:

"Which way now?"

"Into the thicket," Friar Tuck replied. "We must lie quiet for a time.

Robin Hood told me of a certain path leading to a certain place. But go on; we must not talk here."

Something began to strike Snayle that all was not well, for Father Simon's voice sounded strangely on his ears.

"Lift your cowl!" he said.

"Why?"

"Because you have kept your face hidden from me all day."

"And why not—— Hist! Quick! Into the thicket! I hear someone approaching."

Thrown off his guard, Snayle put spurs to his horse and vanished amid the trees.

The friar sped after him, flew past him, and then, wheeling round, dashed full butt at him and drove him headlong out of his saddle.

It was done in a moment, and before Snayle could rise Friar Tuck, leaping out of the saddle, was upon him. His intention was to bind him and hold him prisoner with Father Simon.

But Snayle's next move necessitated far more drastic treatment.

Friar Tuck had no sooner grasped his wrists when the man snatched one hand away, drew a small dagger from his breast, and stabbed desperately at his captor.

The friar started back in the nick of time to save himself from a fatal thrust.

Next moment his heavy right fist got to work again. One, two, three terrible blows he dealt the man, who fell back like a log. His race was run.

"Ah, me!" said Friar Tuck. "No longer must I call myself a man of peace. But 'twas done in self-defence."

Remounting his horse, he rode after the other, and hastened to the place where he had left Will Scarlet, and there found him.

"So far I have succeeded well," the friar said. "I have seen Robin Hood and Little John and cheered them. But I will tell you all anon. What have you done with Father Simon?"

"I have tied him neatly and dropped him in a hollow tree for safety," Will Scarlet replied.

"You could not find a better place for

him," the friar said. "We'll wait until darkness sets in, and then to our comrades. Will Scarlet, there may be tough work before us, but we will save Robin Hood and Little John yet!"

No sooner had the sun gone below the horizon than poor Father Simon, more dead than alive through fright, was fetched from the hollow tree, the gag removed from his mouth, and his limbs unbound.

"Get up in front of my horse," said Friar Tuck. "We intend to hold you as hostage until Robin Hood and Little John are free. Utter one cry on the way, and I will see how much of my quarter-staff you can swallow!"

The priest was quite willing to do anything so long as his life was spared, and mounted at once.

Osbert de Grayle's charger bore the double weight easily and well, and, on the word being given by Friar Tuck, they set off at a smart pace.

By divers turnings and narrow roads they went, drawing nearer and nearer to the cave where the expectant foresters waited. Not a moment had been lost. Bows were tested, great stacks of arrows made, swords and halberds sharpened; but what was better than all, Sir Arthur Melton, the Grey Knight, had come on the scene with a number of his men.

Maid Marian had been nearly out of her mind with grief and anxiety; but now that the prospect was brighter she wiped the tears from her eyes and cheered up considerably.

Simon was taken blindfolded into the cave, and instead of being harshly treated, as he expected, food and wine were given him, and he was shown a niche to sleep in.

"Father Simon," said Friar Tuck, with a merry twinkle in his eyes, "has been very good to us; therefore, while we are away see well to him. He has lived so well at the castle that poor fare might have a serious effect on him."

The foresters told how they had passed the word to the Saxon peasantry, many of whom were ready to join them on the road.

Fain would they have persuaded Friar Tuck and Will Scarlet to stay

and enjoy their well-deserved rest; but both the friar and Will laughed the idea to scorn.

"Why," cried Friar Tuck, "I must be in the castle by dawn. And as to Will Scarlet, I trow you will find him something better to do than sleeping here."

"Sleep! I'll know no sleep until I have grasped Robin Hood's hand again."

There was no time to be lost in talking. It was, indeed, the time to be up and doing; so, all being ready, the men were placed in battle array and sallied forth.

Through the long night they marched steadily in three divisions—an advance guard, under the command of Sir Arthur Melton; then the main body; and, finally, a rearguard, crescent in form, with a space of about ten yards between each man.

And from huts and cottages men stole like shadows, with bows and bills, to join the foresters.

Scarcely a halt was made until the paling stars told that dawn was at hand. Then amid the trees through which no path ran, they sat down to eat, drink, and rest.

They were now within a short distance of Derby town, but so dense was the forest, and so wild everything about them, that they might have been a hundred miles from any habitation.

Friar Tuck now made his arrangements with Will Scarlet.

The friar, being still in Father Simon's garb, decided to go straight to the castle; while Will, still disguised as a shepherd, was to hang about the market-place and instantly report to the foresters should anything happen likely to arouse his suspicion that the execution would take place earlier.

That there was wisdom in making these preparations will be seen anon.

Friar Tuck set forth alone, and trudging manfully through the thicket until he came to a path, entered Derby market-place.

To his horror, the stake for burning Robin Hood and Little John was already fixed, and Hugo and his assistants were prowling round, arranging thick pieces of faggot-wood.

What to do Friar Tuck did not know. Darting into one of the side-streets, he stood still and reflected.

Then the truth flashed into his brain. The death of Walbert had been reported to Osbert de Grayle, and it was more than likely that Snayle's body had been found and conveyed to the castle.

Moreover, it was most probable that the Norman noble had inquired for Father Simon, and his absence, combined with the other two events, had given him reason to hasten the burning of Robin Hood and Little John.

"I must go back and meet Will Scarlet," muttered Friar Tuck; "but he may not come by the same path as I did. Ah, woe to us all if the deed is done before rescue can come!"

The prospect of returning five miles, tired as he was, was no light thing for Friar Tuck to contemplate; but his duty was plain before him, and shirk it he durst not dream of.

As luck would happen, a cart with wooden wheels, drawn by two sturdy horses, came along; and Friar Tuck, without asking the driver's permission, climbed into it.

"Whither go you?" he asked.

"Through the new path that was cut this very year through the forest," the man replied.

"Quick, then!" said the friar. And then, running his eyes over the man: "My friend, you are of Saxon birth. Have you ever heard of Friar Tuck?"

"Ay, that I have, and willingly would I meet him."

"I am he!" the friar gasped. "Nay, start not: I swear to you that what I say is true! Drive where I bid you, and your hands shall be filled with crown-pieces."

Without delay the man whipped up his horses, and Friar Tuck dived under some straw at the bottom of the cart, peeping out his head every now and then to give directions.

"A shepherd comes this way," the driver cried suddenly.

"It is Will Scarlet!" Friar Tuck said, starting up. "Ho, there, Will! come back with me; or if you can run quicker than the horses, for the love of Heaven

do so! The stake is already fixed in the market-place——"

Will Scarlet waited to hear no more.

Flinging off his shepherd's smock, and standing in tunic and hose, he uttered a sharp cry and dashed through the greenwood at the speed of a hunted stag.

CHAPTER 10.

On the Threshold of Death.

THE news of Walbert's fate sped like wildfire through Derby, and it did not take long to reach Derby Castle.

When it came to Osbert de Grayle's ears he cursed his informers, demanding why he should be troubled with the death of a churl of an innkeeper.

Later on he sent for Snayle, but that individual was not to be found, and the Norman noble swore to clip his ears for daring to leave the castle without permission.

"Send Father Simon to me," Osbert de Grayle said. "He shall advise me, for perchance there is more in Walbert's death than I wot of. He was useful to me, and it does not seem that his death came about through a brawl."

Like Snayle, Father Simon was conspicuous by his absence, and then Osbert de Grayle's suspicions were fully aroused.

"Shade of Thor!" he said, "there must be something wrong indeed. Can there be a conspiracy afloat? Ho, there, ye gaping dogs! some of you go to the Red Tower and bring Hugo to me."

Pain-stricken as he was, Osbert de Grayle struggled into a sitting position as the executioner, bringing his axe with him, appeared.

"Stand you before me and listen," the Norman noble said. "Your wits are as sharp as your instrument of death when you like to use them."

Interspersed with oaths and groans, De Grayle laid the case before Hugo.

The executioner stood in the shadow, leaning upon his axe, and secretly enjoying the agony his lord and master was suffering.

"You ask for my advice, and I will give it," he said. "Let Robin Hood and Little John perish at noon to-mor-

row. What good can be done by keeping them in the dungeon? None; but harm may come of it. Trust me, Walbert fell by the sword of a Saxon rebel, and such may be Master Snayle's fate."

"Then there is Father Simon," said Osbert de Grayle. "He has been absent from the castle since early morn."

"That has never happened before," Hugo said. "Are you so blind as not to see that since one of Robin Hood's followers escaped with Hartford and the wench Steyne, other rebels might have come stealing into the town—ay, and, perchance, into the very castle?"

"So be it, then," said Osbert de Grayle. "Let the captives perish in the flames to-morrow at noon."

Hugging himself with delight, the executioner left the Norman nobleman, and summoning his assistants bade them make preparations for the coming "show."

Late that night a man came into Derby town bringing the tidings that he had found the body of a man, and soon it was known at the castle that Snayle was dead.

It was on the stroke of midnight that Hugo, with some men-at-arms, paid a visit to Robin Hood and Little John.

Both were asleep and dreaming hopefully, when the noise made by the closing of the dungeon door aroused them.

They thought their hour had come, and rose like men to meet their fate.

Hugo stood with folded arms, with the flare of a torch upon his hideous face, looking more like fiend than man.

"I bring you joyful news," he said. "To-morrow at noon both of you die by slow fire at the stake in the market-place, and your ashes shall be left as a consolation to those who love you. Now, bold Robin Hood, what say you to this?"

"By the rood!" Robin replied, curling his lip with scorn; "why should I waste breath on such a monster as you? Go tell your master to get his good looks back again."

He and Little John, lifting their manacled hands, rushed forward to strike the executioner, but the men-at-arms thrust them back against the wall with their pikes.

"Pitiful creature!" Little John roared at Hugo. "Had I but you in the grasp of one hand, I would crush the life out of you!"

Hugo only laughed.

"You will sing a different tune to-morrow," he said. "I promise you, and the people who will come to see, a rare treat. Now I'll to my bed. To-morrow at noon! Ho, - ho! To-morrow at noon!"

For some moments after Hugo had gone neither Robin Hood nor Little John spoke.

"Friend John," Robin said at length, "nothing short of a miracle can save us. To-morrow we must part for ever on earth."

For the first time in his life Little John broke completely down.

"It is not death I fear," he said, "for I would willingly lay down my life a thousand times for you. Robin, this cannot be true, for surely Heaven will not allow these wretches to kill a champion of the poor!"

"Others will arise," Robin Hood replied, "and others will avenge us."

"Others!" cried Little John. "Who shall take your place? Heaven! my heart is bursting when I think of it. Oh, Robin! best of men, what will Maid Marian say when——"

"Name not her," Robin Hood interrupted hoarsely, "but pray for her as I will. Pray that she may be spared to lead—and she will—gallant men to this castle, and leave no stones upon each other. Come, sit down, John, and be comforted. Hear you not that my voice is steady? Be you my comfort, too, lest you unman me."

Little John threw himself upon the stone bench, his whole frame racked with grief. After a while he grew calmer and pretended to sleep.

Robin Hood, gathering up his chains, so that their clanking should not disturb the giant, paced the dungeon floor slowly. He put the case to his mind and argued it out. If but Friar Tuck could get an inkling that the executions were to be hastened on, there might be hope; but that did not seem possible.

No! He and Little John must suffer,

and leave it to others to complete the work of justice.

Well, he had done his best, and left his mark on many a tyrant, so why not be satisfied? But alas! how the time had sped, and how much more was there to do!

He feared for the Saxons. On hearing of his death, many of the poor oppressed creatures would shrink from farther contest and give it up as hopeless.

Disaster might fall upon the foresters, and then—Robin Hood durst not think of the misery and devastation that would follow.

A sudden agony filled him, but he beat it back, and then, sinking on the straw in a corner of the dungeon, he pillowed his head upon his arm and fell asleep.

Dawn came, and with it a dull thudding that awoke both Robin Hood and Little John.

One wing of the castle abutted on the market-place, and Osbert de Grayle's men were ramming a great stake into the ground.

No one came near the doomed captives, not even to offer a drop of water. Their sufferings were terrible, but they bore them nobly. All would soon be over. No matter in whatever terrible form death may come, it ends in peace.

In the meantime Osbert de Grayle had sent for Margaret Woolrych.

"You see," he said, "how impossible it will be for me to go with you to the place of the hidden treasure to-morrow. Is there no other way?"

"I have been thinking of it," the old woman replied, "They tell me that Robin Hood and Little John die to-day."

"Ay, and so shall you to-morrow unless you divulge your secret. I will not be put off with the paltry excuse that you cannot explain where the treasure lies."

"I will endeavour to do so, but not until to-morrow, though you burn me at the stake with the outlaw and his friend," Margaret Woolrych replied. "I promise that I will come to you to-morrow morn, if not sooner, and tell you wherein my secret lies."

"Enough! Depart."

"Go you to see Robin Hood and Little John perish?" Margaret Woolrych demanded.

"No! My broken limbs and battered face will not permit of my so doing. I have not mended as I wished, and the leech tells me that contact with the air may bring on an incurable ailment."

"You are wise," said Margaret Woolrych. "Remain within the castle."

As she turned to go, Osbert de Grayle looked suspiciously at her.

"I wonder if she thinks to hoodwink me with some lying story?" he muttered.

"I wonder what he would think if he knew what my secret consisted of?" Margaret Woolrych thought as she passed through the door.

Entering the courtyard, she walked up to the cages containing the bloodhounds and leopards.

The brutes were yelping and snarling as though they scented blood.

"Be patient," Margaret Woolrych said; "you shall not have to wait long for a feast."

There was bustle and expectation everywhere in the castle.

Groups of men-at-arms stood talking in hushed whispers. The great lodge near the portcullis was full of warriors, and every now and then Hugo would come shuffling in for something that he required.

"Your turn next, hag!" he hissed, shaking his fist at Margaret Woolrych.

"Wait!" she replied disdainfully. "Be not too impatient. Get you to your horrible work and leave me in peace. And keep this in your mind, Master Hugo: Never count your chickens before they are hatched."

"Witch!" Hugo hissed, "I'd give a month's wages to put you to the torture now."

"I doubt it not; but that you have not the power to do. I defy you! Quit my sight, or I'll tell Osbert de Grayle."

"I'll hug my revenge," Hugo snarled. "She shall not escape me, even if I deal with her without permission."

The hours wore on, and as the sun took its southern course a band of

armed men were marched to the dungeon.

"Robin Hood and Little John, come forth!" cried the officer in command.

The outlaw and the giant obeyed at once.

"Have you anything to say before we take you to Osbert de Grayle?" the officer demanded. "He desires to bid you farewell."

"He might have spared us that," Robin Hood replied. "For myself I have naught to say, and naught to ask, save that if you are a man you will give me water to quench my thirst."

"I have no order to do so."

"Then I will not make the same request for myself," Little John said. "I have nothing to say. Lead on, you hired assassins; we will follow."

Looking round, he saw Hugo grinning at him, and on a sudden impulse the giant sprang at him and hurled him to the floor with a crash. Next instant he was among the men-at-arms, striking right and left with his manacled hands.

Robin Hood followed his example, and in a few moments several of the soldiers were lying stunned and bleeding on the flagstones.

But what valour could withstand such odds?

The Normans flew at them like tigers, and soon, breathless, but not dismayed, they were secured and marched into the presence of Osbert de Grayle.

"So," said the Norman noble, "this is the last I am to see of you. I had hoped to pay you a lengthy visit, but it was not to be. Little John, I have given orders that you shall suffer most."

"For that I thank you, wretch!" Little John replied. "Would to Heaven you would let me die instead of Robin Hood!"

"That cannot be, for I should be breaking faith with Prince John," Osbert de Grayle replied. "I swore to him that I would slay the arch-rebel if he ever fell into my hands."

"Let Prince John look to himself," Little John retorted. "The——"

"Hush!" Robin Hood whispered. "Name not the king."

"My mouth almost betrayed me," Little John whispered back.

"So fare you well," Osbert de Grayle said. "And when the flames assail you, think of my vengeance."

"I'll think of you where fire and torture never cease," Robin Hood replied scornfully. "Hound of a Norman tyrant, our sufferings will soon end, but yours will go on for ever!"

Osbert de Grayle snapped his fingers.

"Away with them!" he cried, "and when all is over bring me the good news. Then let the bells in the turret clang, and let every man eat, drink, and be merry to-night."

"Come, then," said Hugo, tapping Robin Hood and Little John on their shoulders. "Your well-deserved rewards await you."

As they turned to leave the chamber they beheld Margaret Woodrych.

"Heaven support you in your great trial!" she said.

"Woman," Robin Hood replied, "I thank you. On, then, varlets, and do your worst!"

CHAPTER 11.

Saved in the Nick of Time.—A Rout of Normans.

THE captives, surrounded by a crowd of soldiers, were then taken to the Hall of Death, where their chains were knocked off brutally by the malicious Hugo.

Robin Hood and Little John bore their sufferings without flinching, and even laughed and jeered at the executioner, who, finding that he could make no impression on them, said:

"Wait! Wait awhile, and we shall see!"

As soon as all was ready, men ran to different part of the ramparts and sounded exultant notes on trumpets.

Robin Hood was to die with his giant, Little John. They had been the terror of the Norman tyrants, but no more would they strike. The stake was ready, and the faggots piled.

The people poured into the marketplace, but were pressed back a distance from the stake, for an attempt to rescue was feared. In that case Osbert de

Grayle had given instructions to his hirelings not to spare the Saxons.

When all was over a signal was to be given him, by means of a flag hoisted so that he could see it from where he sat.

The air was filled with strange noises when a postern was thrown open, and a man in complete armour, carrying a battle-axe over his shoulder, stepped out.

He was quickly followed by a number of pikemen, who, throwing themselves out in open order, threatened the people with their formidable weapons.

Then came Hugo the executioner, dressed in a tight-fitting suit and bearing a brand wound with pitch and tow, ready to be lighted.

He walked with a kind of swagger, rolling his head from side to side, and looked back now and then to see whether the demeanour of the captives changed as each step drew them nearer to a death so terrible in form as the stoutest heart might shrink from.

But to his chagrin he could not see any sign save of defiance.

Robin Hood and Little John were surrounded by a cordon of soldiers, through which it was impossible to break.

Amid shouts, groans of execration, and cries of pity, they were led to the stake and fastened to it.

In one corner of the market-place a commotion took place, and Osbert de Grayle's men rushed to quell it.

"Cheer up, John," Robin Hood said; "we shall soon meet again. It is hard to part with our friends in the forest; but years will soon roll on, and they will come in the fulness of time to greet us. Maid Marian," he added, under his breath—"Maid Marian, my darling, good-bye! But not for long."

"Robin," Little John replied, "as you say, this is but a short stage from misery to happiness. I go undismayed. Farewell!"

Hugo now advanced.

Halting before his victims, he folded his arms and glared as if he could not glut his eyes sufficiently upon them.

"Robin Hood," he said sneeringly, "there is still time for you to call for

your friends. Ay, you may call, but they will not come. You laugh at me, but I know you are thinking of the days of liberty you spent in the forest. Under the greenwood tree you have lived, and against the trunk of a tree you shall die!"

So saying, he ran back, crying:

"Ho, there! light the brand and hand it to me!"

As it was handed to him, he whirled it into a flame, and uttering a yell of unholy joy advanced to the stake and thrust it amid the faggots.

They caught light at once.

For a moment a cloud of smoke hid Robin Hood and Little John from view; but it soon cleared away, showing the crackling flames.

"Higher! higher!" Hugo the executioner yelled, thrusting the brand in again.

At that moment a mighty shout rent the air.

The soldiers did not seem to understand what it meant until a flight of arrows rushed into their midst.

Then came a wild cry:

"The foresters are upon us! Look to yourselves! The foresters are upon us!"

Hugo rushed to the faggots again, and as he was stirring up the flames Sir Arthur Melton, the Grey Knight, burst through the Normans on his charger, and struck the executioner a tremendous blow on the head.

"No Normans! Rescue! No Normans! Down with the tyrants!"

Men in Lincoln green, men in armour, men in humble fustian, armed with every conceivable weapon, were now fighting their way towards the stake.

In vain did Osbert de Grayle's soldiers strive to stop them.

Death-dealing arrows, halberds, swords, and even scythe-blades affixed to poles, swept them aside like chaff before the wind.

Then came Friar Tuck, Will Scarlet, Much the Miller's son, kicking away the flaming faggots, while the Grey Knight charged hither and thither among the Normans, striking down all who opposed him.

No sooner were Robin Hood and Little John free than, scorched and half-choked with smoke, they plunged into the fray.

Hugo the executioner for some moments lay as though dead; but terrific though the blow he had received was, he recovered his senses, and contrived to crawl up to the threshold of the postern.

The narrow space within was choked with Norman soldiers.

They dragged Hugo in, and then closed the door against a crowd of others who were fighting to get in.

"Give me an axe!" Little John now roared. "Pshaw! not a toy like that," he added, as one was handed to him. "A club, then—something that I can grip—something that has weight in it."

"Take my mace," Sir Arthur Melton said, tossing it to him. "I trow you will find it heavy enough, even for your giant fist; I will be content with my sword."

"Ay, this is better," Little John replied, flourishing the mace aloft. "My old strength comes back again. I feel not hunger, thirst, or pain. Revenge on the Norman dogs! Revenge!"

The memory of what Robin Hood and he had suffered brought out the savage, and almost blind with fury he ran in among the foe.

The soldiers fled from him in terror.

Those overtaken by Little John turned and made a feeble show of fighting, only to die. The giant asked not quarter, and gave none.

Wounded, yet as steady as a rock, he wielded the terrible mace.

"That for the burning homes!" he thundered as he struck. "That for the murder of innocent women and children! That for the old folk left to perish in the forest! That for the hapless prisoners slain by Osbert de Grayle and Hugo the executioner!"

And now, as was to be expected, the Saxons of Derby rushed out and pursued the Normans from street to street.

Two of the most furious of the avengers were Augustin Hartford and Martin Steyne. Armed with double-handled swords they did fearful execution.

At length the Norman rout was complete, and there fell over Derby town a strange hush.

The sky grew darker and darker, and then the clouds were parted by great bands of vivid light, and the thunder rolled and pealed.

Vivid shafts of lightning flew around the castle, and Osbert de Grayle, half-dead with fright, commanded his attendants to carry him to the Hall of Death beneath the Red Tower, where he could not witness the conflicting elements.

Suddenly the clouds seemed to burst, and a deluge of rain fell.

Presently Hugo was brought into the Hall of Death.

The back of his head bore a terrible wound, but still he raved.

"Fool!" he said, shaking his fist at Osbert de Grayle; "but for you this never could have happened. Did I not advise you to make short work of these Saxons? But you would not, because you thought to see them suffer! And now——"

He pointed to the blood-stained bandages with which his head was wrapped, and such was his fury that he could not finish the sentence.

"It matters but little what has happened outside," Osbert de Grayle replied. "We are well garrisoned; our ramparts are filled with men ready to meet the foe, and I defy Robin Hood to take the castle. Hugo, we shall live to see the outlaw perish!"

"Pride your heart on no such things," the executioner replied. "As for myself, my hours are numbered. There is no hope for me. But who comes here? A murrain seize her! It is that witch, Margaret Woolrych."

Without taking the slightest notice of Hugo, she approached Osbert de Grayle.

"The bloodhounds howl and the leopards snarl," she said, looking the Norman nobleman full in the eyes. "The brutes scent death, and your men tell me that the streets are full of dead."

"Why trouble me with these things?" Osbert de Grayle said.

"Why? Listen! Do you not hear

amid the crashing of the thunder there rises the tramp of feet? Your castle will fall about your ears before the sun goes down! Send every man to guard the portcullis, or——"

"This sounds strange to my ears—and from a Saxon, too," Osbert de Grayle interrupted.

"Have I not a compact with you? Am I not still in your power?"

"True," Osbert de Grayle said.

"Yesterday," Margaret Woolrych continued, "you bade me come to you to-day. I am here to tell you the secret. Bid these men go, for, by Hengist and Horsa, you cannot have too many to defend the castle. Then I will whisper my secret in your ear."

Osbert de Grayle hesitated, but why should he fear an old woman, weak and tottering?

He looked at Hugo for advice, but the executioner had swooned.

"Go, then," the Norman nobleman said to his attendants; "but return quickly, and report to me how matters are going."

No sooner were they gone than Margaret Woolrych ran to the door, and closing it, shot the great bolts into the sockets.

"Hag," Osbert de Grayle cried, "what means this?"

"Patience—patience!" the woman replied. "You are about to learn my secret."

She drew herself up before him, and stood as motionless as a statue, but suddenly she darted forward and snatched Osbert de Grayle's sword from its sheath.

"Help," the Norman cried—"help! This beldam will murder me!"

"Nay, for killing you would be no murder," Margaret Woolrych replied. "You asked me where this treasure is hidden. It is here!" striking her heart. "I have hoarded it for years. Every thought of revenge has been a jewel to me. I have dreamed of it, nursed it, added to it night by night and day by day, and now it is mine, and the secret yours."

Osbert de Grayle, helpless and aghast, could only sit and glare at her.

"When I met you outside the walls

of this castle," Margaret Woolrych continued, "when you ordered me to be dragged hither with the rest of your poor victims, you were strong and cruel, but now you are weak and powerless. Villain, you slew my children; you brought misery and poverty upon me, and so die!"

With his own sword she struck him again and again. She had but little strength, and the wounds she inflicted did not dispatch the Norman.

Dropping from his chair, he dragged his broken limb to a corner, and there sat crouching and yelling for help when no help could come.

Margaret Woolrych followed him into the corner, and struck yet again and again at him.

In pain and misery, the wretched man bowed his head, and then, as the sword descended upon his neck, he died.

Hugo still lay unconscious.

Margaret Woolrych dashed past him and rushed to the ramparts.

The blackness in the sky had given way to grey, with shafts of blue here and there, telling that the storm was over.

Down in the streets she saw a mighty gathering of men, with Robin Hood and Little John leading, and Sir Arthur Melton in close attendance.

Rushing down into the great lodge, filled with soldiers, she cried:

"All is lost! The northern wing is full of men! Lower the drawbridge, and flee for your lives!"

In an instant the great wheel putting the machinery in motion began to revolve.

The portcullis rose, the drawbridge fell, and a great crowd rushed across it.

"Ha, ha, ha!" Margaret Woolrych shrieked, clapping her hands with delight. "The varlets fly to their deaths! The northern wing full of men! It is, but those men are Osbert de Grayle's. Ho there, gallant Robin Hood! Ho there, free men of the forest! This way—this way!"

Short and sharp was the fight that followed.

The Normans made but a feeble resistance, and then, throwing down their weapons, fled in all directions.

Cheering wildly, the Saxons rushed into the castle, and the remainder of the garrison surrendered.

In those horrible cages in the courtyard the bloodhounds and leopards leaped at the bars.

"Ho, there, archers!" Robin Hood cried. "Kill me those brutes!"

"Nay," said Margaret Woolrych; "many a poor Saxon has died by their fangs; Hugo the executioner is not dead yet. He lies in the Hall of Death under the Red Tower. Let him be food for them!"

"No, no!" Robin Hood replied, shuddering; "I could not do such a thing! It is too horrible! But lead on to the Red Tower. Little John shall deal with Hugo."

"Give his body to the hounds!" Margaret Woolrych cried, throwing up her arms. "Why so chicken-hearted? Why so merciful? Does a demon in the form of a man deserve Christian burial? No—a thousand times, no!"

Paying no heed to her raving, Robin Hood and Little John followed her to the Hall of Death.

Whatever fate they had in mind for the villainous executioner was unnecessary, for Hugo was dead.

"Justice is done!" said Robin Hood, "Now to loot the castle, and then burn it to the ground. Heaven be praised! another tyrant is removed from the face of the earth!"

* * * * *

Our story is told.

Enriched and flushed with success, Robin Hood and his men returned to their retreat in Sherwood Forest.

And then there came a swain to take Ruth and Martin Steyne away, for Osbert de Grayle was dead, and the tyranny under which the people of Derby suffered was over.

But Robin knew that other tyrants would arise, and that the day was not far distant when he and his merry men would be called to arms again.

THE END.

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